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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0645
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0250
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0664
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4371
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2663
RUEHK/T/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0684
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000821

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/14/2018

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV PREL SOCI UZ

SUBJECT: UZBEK AUTHORITIES REJECT CHRISTIAN LITERATURE
SHIPMENT

REF: 07 TASHKENT 1414

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 8, the Ambassador and DCM met with Bible Society Director Sergei Mitin, who reported that Uzbek authorities ordered the return of a large shipment of Christian literature that the Bible Society attempted to import into Uzbekistan in May. The authorities did not provide a detailed response of why the literature could not be imported into Uzbekistan, but Mitin believed it was because the shipment included 7,000 children's Bibles in Uzbek and Karakalpak, which the authorities might have suspected would be used in missionary activities. Mitin also reported participating in a "very tense" June 10 meeting at the Religious Affairs Committee, in which officials accused the Bible Society of unspecified illegal acts. Shortly afterwards, Mitin was informed that the Justice Ministry would begin a new audit of the Bible Society's activities, even though its last audit was completed only in December. Mitin fears that authorities are retaliating against the Bible Society for the literature shipment, and fears that they may attempt to use the results of the audit to revoke the Bible Society's registration. We generally agree with Mitin's analysis, although it is too early to tell to what extent the government will retaliate against the Bible Society. It is also possible that the Bible Society and Uzbek authorities will be able to reach some sort of compromise, as they have done in the past. The Ambassador offered to convey The Bible Society's letter of complaint to appropriate Uzbek authorities. This episode could serve as an important test case of one of the provisions in the agreement negotiated between Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Hanford and the GOU. End summary.

AUTHORITIES REJECT IMPORTATION OF CHRISTIAN MATERIALS

¶2. (C) The Bible Society has been registered in Uzbekistan

since 1994 and is responsible for importing and distributing Bibles and other literature for the country's various Christian denominations. During a July 8 meeting at the Embassy, Mitin told the Ambassador and the DCM that a large shipment of over 11,000 Christian works - including almost 7,000 Children's Bibles in Uzbek and Karakalpak - was shipped by the Russian Bible Society in Moscow and arrived in Uzbekistan on May 17. As dictated by Uzbek law, the literature was impounded by Uzbek Customs until the Religious Affairs Committee (RAC) could determine whether the literature could be legally imported into Uzbekistan (Note: The RAC must approve all religious literature imported into Uzbekistan. End note.)

¶3. (C) Mitin told the Ambassador that he received a short letter from RAC Chairman Ortik Yusupov on July 8 (but dated June 30), stating that the literature could not be imported into Uzbekistan for several reasons, including: the Bible Society had not presented samples of the literature to the RAC; the Bible Society did not earlier inform the RAC about its plans to import the literature; and the titles of the literature on the shipping documents did not match those in the actual shipment. Mitin argued that the RAC's claims in its letter were not true.

¶4. (C) Mitin believed that the real reason the RAC rejected the literature was because the Uzbek government seeks to prevent the import of any Christian literature in Uzbek or Karakalpak, believing that they will be used for missionary activities targeting Muslims (Comment: Proselytism is illegal in Uzbekistan, but the import of Christian material in Uzbek

or Karkalpak is not forbidden by Uzbek law and is completely within the Bible Society's legal mandate. End comment.) Since 2006, the Bible Society has only been allowed to officially import 500 books into Uzbekistan (reftel). According to Mitin, the Bible Society was now close to running out of certain Christian works in any language.

TENSE MEETING AT THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

¶5. (C) Mitin also told the Ambassador about participating in a "very tense" June 10 meeting regarding the imported literature with RAC Chairman Ortik Yusupov, Deputy RAC Chairman Bekhzot Kadirov, and Ministry of Justice Department for Public Associations and Religious Organizations Head Jalol Abdusattarov. According to Mitin, the Uzbek officials accused the Bible Society of violating Uzbek law by importing the literature and said that documents to this effect would be soon forwarded to the General Prosecutor's Office for further investigation. Mitin countered that the Bible Society's actions were completely within Uzbek law, but his argument reportedly fell on deaf ears. (Yusupov reiterated to the Ambassador on July 15 that the Bible Society's actions were illegal.)

JUSTICE MINISTRY INITIATES NEW AUDIT OF BIBLE SOCIETY

¶6. (C) The Ministry of Justice began a new audit of the Bible Society on July 4, even though the Ministry completed its last audit only in December and organizations are normally audited only once every three years. Mitin fears that the government may use the results of the audit in an attempt to deregister the Bible Society. Mitin told poloff that on the first day of the audit, one official of the Ministry of Justice attempted to secretly take from the Bible Society some Christian literature in Uzbek. Mitin caught the official in the act and demanded that he return the literature and leave the auditing team, to which the other members of the team agreed. Mitin later informed poloff that the officials finished their audit, but he has not yet received any results. Mitin observed that the Ministry took months to get back to him on the results of the December audit.

MITIN AND AMBASSADOR DISCUSS POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

¶ 17. (C) Mitin and the Ambassador discussed how they should respond to the government's actions. Mitin said he would contest the statements in Yusupov's June 30 letter, which he believed would be easy to disprove. Mitin also planned to draft a letter to President Karimov, which he would share with the Embassy and several European Embassies. Mitin expressed (perhaps naively) his belief that some of Karimov's advisors (such as Yusupov) were to blame for the Bible Society's difficulties, and that if Karimov himself was informed of those difficulties, he would decide in favor of the Bible Society. The Ambassador said he would be happy to convey the Bible Society's letter to appropriate government officials when it was ready.

DOUBTS SUPPORT OF RUSSIAN EMBASSY OR ORTHODOX CHURCH

¶ 18. (C) As the literature originated from Russia and the Bible Society also provides literature to Orthodox believers, Mitin said he would contact the Russian Embassy about the Bible Society's problems. However, he doubted that the Russians would expend their political capital on the Bible Society's behalf, as they generally showed little interest in

religious freedom issues. He also doubted that he could count on the support of Orthodox Church leaders, noting that the Metropolitan maintained very close relations with Uzbekistan's Muslim leaders, who are not known to be sympathetic towards Uzbekistan's Christian minorities, especially those who are viewed as attempting to convert Muslims (Comment: The Orthodox Metropolitan is himself one of the fiercest critics of such Christian groups, whom he no doubt believes are trying to convert Orthodox believers as well. End comment.) Mitin explained that the Orthodox Church was also no longer formally associated with the Bible Society in Uzbekistan.

BIBLE SOCIETY WILLING TO COMPROMISE, AS BEFORE

¶ 19. (C) After the meeting with the Ambassador, Mitin told poloff that he was willing to reach a compromise with the RAC over the literature shipment, which he has done in the past. Mitin explained that in 2006, the Bible Society negotiated with the RAC to allow the import of 500 Christian books out of a total shipment of 4,000 works. The other 3,500 books remained with customs for about a year, at which point Mitin was able to bribe custom officials to release them (reftel).

COMMENT

¶ 10. (C) We agree with Mitin that the Bible Society is being targeted for harassment by Uzbek authorities for attempting to import a large number of Christian works in Uzbek and Karakalpak. Uzbek authorities are especially skittish about the import of such literature, believing that it will be used in missionary activities aimed at Muslims (which, to certain degree, is true). Proselytism is illegal in Uzbekistan and authorities clearly link missionary activity with the potential for social unrest, which they seek to avoid at all cost. Muslim and Orthodox Christian leaders also seem to be pressuring authorities to clamp down on Christian sects which are seen as trying to convert members of their congregations. Nevertheless, there is nothing in Uzbekistan's laws that prohibits the Bible Society from importing such literature. The Ambassador has raised Mitin's concerns with MFA, Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Yusupov, and presidential religious advisor Abduhalinov, citing Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford's negotiations with the Uzbek government on steps it can take to improve religious freedom in the country and President Bush's July 14 speech marking the 10th anniversary of the IRF Act. It is too early to tell to what extent the government will retaliate against the Bible Society, and it is also possible that they will reach some sort of compromise, as in

previous years. This episode appears to be significant test case of one provision of the agreement negotiated between Ambassador Hanford and the GOU on religious freedom, and we will urge the GOU to view it in that light.

NORLAND